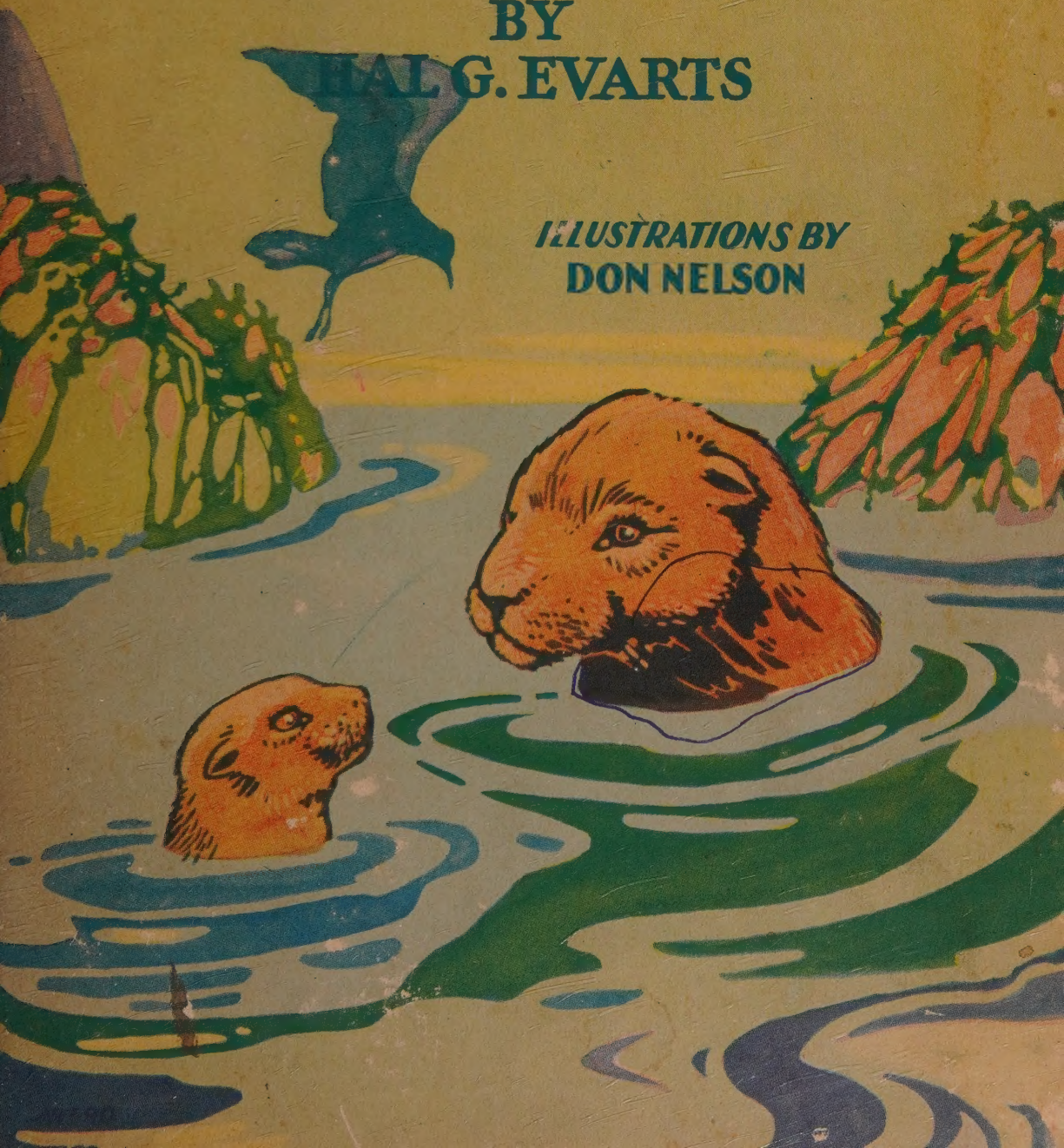


Peggy

KOBI OF THE SEA BY HAL G. EVARTS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
DON NELSON







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By
HAL G. EVARTS

Illustrated by
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KOBI *of the Sea*

By HAL G. EVARTS



KOBI was drowsily conscious of a soothing undulation, slow and rhythmical, as if he were being rocked gently in a cradle; which, in truth, he was—rocked in the cradle of the deep. The undulations were the gentle ground swells of the North Pacific during one of its rare periods of calm, and Kobi was cradled on the ample breast of his mother, who slept on her back with her short forelegs clasping her newborn babe. Occasionally a wavelet washed over her, inundating Kobi as well. Kobi disengaged himself from the clasping arms and crawled about his mother's recumbent frame on a touring exploration. This small living island upon which he found himself was surrounded on all sides by the gray-green sea.

Presently his mother, roused by his activities, opened her eyes and clasped him once again in her arms. She sang to him in soft crooning tones as a human mother might hum a lullaby to quiet her babe.

Perhaps, if sea otters or some allied form of life existed at an early day along the shores of the Mediterranean, it was upon such vocal efforts that the ancients founded their tales of mermaids and of the beautiful sirens that sang to lure sailors upon the rocks. Sea otters, certainly, are beautiful creatures, they sing to their young, and their favorite resorts are among the kelp beds near wild wave-lashed rocks. Also, many a man has come to grief upon the rocks while endeavoring to bag the pelt of a sea otter. However, in case sea otters were the original sirens, sea-

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faring folk had little to fear from them in Kobi's day, for Kobi and his mother were but two of a very few survivors of a once plentiful but rapidly vanishing breed. The beautiful pelt of the sea otter, the most highly prized fur in the world, and the most valuable, had been responsible for the virtual extermination of the race at the hands of man.

During the first three weeks of his life Kobi was unaware of the fact that harm or violence existed in the world; that grave menace lurked behind every rocky point and timbered headland, ready to pounce at any instant and shatter the quiet contentment of his life. He knew only a sense of vast security when clasped to his mother's breast as the old sea otter slept upon her back or hummed soft notes of love to him. But this security was only fancied, apt to be destroyed at any moment, for his mother's pelt was worth at least a thousand dollars to the man who would be so fortunate as to secure it. In such a contingency Kobi, left alone, would soon perish miserably.

All save the most hardened of those who once engaged in pelagic sealing, and later in seal piracy, callous to wholesale killing, nevertheless declare that the death of a mother sea otter invariably

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induced a feeling of guilt and depression that tempered the elation over bagging such a valuable prize. The devotion of the mothers to their young was almost human. However, such sentiments were not allowed to interfere with business, and the fact that Kobi the infant sea otter would perish miserably in case of his mother's death would not operate to prolong her life for a single instant in the event that the most tender-hearted of sealers was afforded opportunity to deprive her of it.

But of this Kobi knew nothing whatever. He learned to swim, to play about in the water unafraid, clambering back to his mother's sleeping form to rest or nurse as occasion demanded. When hungry the old sea otter repaired to the vicinity of offshore rocks or near the coasts of the islands themselves, seeking shallow banks where the depth did not exceed ten fathoms at the most. The chief food of her tribe consisted of a creature known to both the natives and the whites of the North Pacific as the sea egg. Its slightly flattened circular shell is pierced by a central orifice that causes it to resemble a pinkish doughnut more closely than it partakes of the semblance of an egg.



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Kobi's comfortable sense of security was rudely shattered when, upon nearing a cluster of bold barnacle-incrusted rocks against which the white surf battered and roared, his mother dived suddenly and he found himself alone upon the vast surface of the sea. For the first time fear came to him, a devastating sense of helplessness, and his baby throat constricted. His affrighted complaints, resembling the crooning notes of his mother when she hummed lullabies to him, were drowned in the roar of the surf. For the space of a full minute he paddled about, deserted and alone, his panic mounting. Then a dark head broke water a few yards from him. He swam to his mother with all possible dispatch and nosed her sleek face in an ecstasy of relief.

The old sea otter turned upon her back and proceeded to devour several sea eggs at her leisure. Kobi, climbing out upon her, sniffed at these objects and found their odor delicious. It roused his hunger and he refreshed himself at the maternal fount while his mother also dined. She returned again and again to the floor of the sea, gathering sea eggs upon the shallow banks and rising to the surface to eat them. Kobi's apprehension at these unannounced disappearances beneath the waves diminished and he soon came to know that his mother would return from the depths. It was not long before he began to taste a few tiny bites of sea eggs.

Mother and son traveled in company with eight other sea otters—that is, they all remained within reasonable distance of one another. Ordinarily half a square mile of water surface would include the entire ten head. Such an aggregation was known to sealers as a pod of sea otters.

From the canoes of native fishermen and hair-seal hunters, from the decks of small craft outfitted specially for the purpose and so constructed that they could cruise shallow rock-studded waters, from the lookout of every sealing vessel that waited to take toll of the fur-seal herds, a sharp watch was kept for a pod of sea otters.

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It was not strange, therefore, that Kobi's clan—formerly so abundant along the entire Pacific Coast of North America in the days of the Spaniards in the south and the Russians in Alaska—that a single trading vessel once secured five thousand sea-otter pelts from the natives of the California coast—should now have diminished in numbers until the entire world take of sea otters, including those of the Siberian, Kamchatkan, and Japanese waters, numbered less than two hundred skins annually. It was a lucky sealing crew that now took a pair of these precious pelts. Kobi was born among the islands of the Alexander Archipelago just off the mainland of Southeastern Alaska. To the south of his habitat there still remained a few scattered members of his tribe along the coast of British Columbia, but the sea otters of the Oregon and California coasts were gone.

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Aside from the eight other individuals that made up the pod with which Kobi and his mother consorted he met no others of his clan. He played with one or another of the two other young otters whenever their mothers approached to visit with his own.

Other mammals of the sea, however, were abundant. His first experience with a creature other than one of his own kind occurred while he was yet somewhat apprehensive whenever his mother dived for sea eggs. She disappeared one day and shortly thereafter a head was thrust above the water a few feet from Kobi and two big brown eyes gazed mournfully into his own for the space of half a minute. Kobi, panic-stricken, dipped under water in his first dive, searching frenziedly for his mother. He suffered no ill effects from this immersion and thereafter he always dived beneath the waves when alarmed. Rising to the surface after this first under-sea adventure, he found that his mother was there before him. Other heads were rising round her, but his mother paid no heed to them. Kobi soon learned that the hair seals frequented the rocky shore in considerable numbers and that they were harmless.

That same night his mother crawled out upon a barnacle-incrusted rock, and Kobi, for the first time, learned that his tiny spraddling legs could be used for other purposes than swimming.

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Two hair seals hauled out near by and drew themselves across the rocks with their flippers. Kobi's own mode of progression by land was much more efficient, for he had four good feet upon which he might walk. Never, however, would they acquire the proficiency upon land that they would in the water.

Porpoises, too, he soon came to know, scores of them leaping and playing about through the loose ranks of the sea-otter pod on occasion. And the birds were legion, the surface of the sea covered with great black rafts of scoters and feeding ducks, while puffins, guillemots, murres, murrelets, loons and others appeared in more scattered formations, cormorants stood in clusters upon the rocks and thousands of gulls wheeled screaming overhead.

One day the otters drifted quite close to a great offshore rock. A giant creature, weighing nearly a ton and with a broad wrinkled countenance, roared down at Kobi from a shelf of rock above the water. Another bull sea lion bellowed in rejoinder, and this fearsome uproar struck terror to Kobi's heart. His



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mother, however, seemed unalarmed at this demonstration. Passing round on the opposite side of the rock Kobi discovered that its slopes were literally swarming with these great creatures. Each bull sea lion ruled his own particular family, consisting of a various number of wives and offspring in all stages of growth. Each family group held clannishly apart. One great bull, with a bellowing roar, slid from his perch and struck the water with a mighty splash. On the instant every member of his household took the plunge, still holding clannishly together. Kobi learned that these creatures, too, despite their fearsome roars, were harmless to his kind.

Then came a day when a great black shape rose above the surface of the ocean, turned in a mighty dive as a vast tail, towering aloft for a moment, slid again beneath the waves. Startled and alarmed at this upheaval, Kobi sped to the safety of his mother's arms. The old sea otter was unperturbed, having seen thousands of whales. Kobi saw these monsters of the deep frequently thereafter and did not trouble even to move as screaming hordes of birds resorted to the spot to prey upon the small fishes that swarmed to the surface to escape the rapacious maws of feeding sperm or sulphur-bottom whales.

Kobi in Danger

There seemed nothing in all the waters of the sea or in the air above it that would harm Kobi. Then one day a native, in a canoe hewed from the trunk of a cedar, cruised about the rocky shore line of an island in search of a hair seal, the greatest delicacy known to his tribe. The day was calm, the sea unruffled. The native's questing eye chanced to stray out across the waters of the strait that separated that island from the next and to focus upon a dark spot that was Kobi's mother sleeping upon her back with Kobi clasped in her arms. Beyond them were other sleeping forms. A thrill of elation such as he had not known for years galvanized the native hunter. He turned back upon his course, rounded a headland and put in at his village. A score of idling natives gathered round him, vastly excited at his report. From the adjacent headland they made out the extent of the pod of sleeping sea otters, then set forth on an encircling movement such as had been the custom of natives when hunting these wary animals from time immemorial. A score of light cedar canoes put to sea, traveling on courses that would take them past the pod by the margin of half a mile. Presently one canoe dropped out and remained stationary, then after an interval another. Each man paddled silently, knowing that the ears of sea otters were very keen. Sleeping placidly through all the natural sounds of the sea, the screaming of birds, roaring of sea lions and the blowing of whales, a sea otter would wake instantly at the creak of oarlocks, a heavy step in the bottom of a boat or an incautiously wielded paddle striking a canoe. Also the sea otter's sense of smell was extremely acute. Man scent, drifting across the surface of the sea from a distance of half a mile, would stampede a pod of sea otters as surely as the

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report of a cannon. Therefore the hunters that were to take the upwind side of the pod posted themselves last.

When all were stationed in the surround, as this native method of sea-otter hunting had been styled by the whites, the ring drew in upon the prey, the canoes converging upon a common center and narrowing the gaps between.

Kobi, sleeping upon his mother's breast, waked suddenly at her violent start. The faintest possible taint of man scent had drifted to her sensitive nose over the surface of the sea, faint indeed but sufficient to galvanize her into immediate panic. She was off on the instant. The hunters on the upward side, seeing the various members of the pod getting swiftly under way, knew that their scent had drifted down ahead of them and that further concealment was impossible. Their shouts rang across the sea, along with a series of reports as they fired at long range. Every sea otter dived, rising only to secure breath when necessary, and at the instant that a head broke water there were rifle balls spitting the surface viciously about it. In every instance the otter dived again without securing a full breath of air.

If not encumbered with the infant Kobi, his mother could have traveled under water for perhaps two hundred yards without rising. Kobi, however, could not remain immersed for so long a time, nor could he travel at his mother's high rate of speed. After fifty yards of such submarine travel he rose for a breath of air, only to dive before quite filling his lungs as rifle balls reached for him.

The cunning of this native method of hunting sea otters—upon which the white men were unable to improve—was soon demonstrated. The attention of the fleeing otters was centered on the canoes behind them. All senses combined to inform them of danger in the rear. Man scent reeked in their nostrils, their ears were assailed by shouts and the reports of guns, and their eyes detected the flashing blades of paddles as the canoes skim-

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med down upon them with the speed of darting swallows. Ahead all was silent, no scent could reach them against the wind, and the occupants of the canoes that waited on the downwind side remained crouched and motionless to avoid the eyes of their intended prey. Not until quite close to the boats did the otters, intent upon escaping the peril in the rear, become aware of the menace ahead. Meanwhile they had been chased at top speed for perhaps a mile, traveling under water the entire distance save when forced to the surface for breath. Not once had the churn-

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ing rifle balls permitted a single head to remain above the surface for a sufficient space to inflate the lungs fully with air. As a consequence, upon encountering these new and nearer enemies just ahead the lungs of every otter in the pod were laboring, and they found themselves unable to remain immersed for any considerable period. Some of them, instead of holding to a straight course and endeavoring to dive beyond the canoes ahead, turned back, only to be confronted by the canoes that raced on from the rear.

Kobi, tired and desperately pressed for air, rose to the surface and discovered a line of canoes close ahead, others to the right front and the left. Terror-stricken, he submerged without having inhaled sufficient air to last him more than a few yards beneath the surface. Instinctively he turned back on his course to avoid the canoes in front. He missed the dark shape of his mother traveling with him, rose to the surface to look for her and saw nothing but canoes converging upon him, darting across the surface like skimming sea birds. His aching lungs demanded air even if death should follow inhalation. Had Kobi been an

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adult sea otter his life would have paid the penalty for that lingering quarter minute. But the keen-eyed hunters in the near-by canoes, no longer firing indiscriminately at every head to force it down without sufficient air, knew this for the head of a baby sea otter whose pelt would be valueless. Poised, ready to fire on the instant, they waited for the head of an adult otter.

Midway of Kobi's life-giving inhalation a dark shape broke surface a short distance from him. A half dozen rifle shots greeted it and a shout of triumph rose on the air, only to be quickly hushed as the hunters realized that the rising otter, a mother with her infant clasped to her breast, had not been shot through the head. Instead a rifle ball had killed the babe, tearing it from her grasp. Out in the center of the circle of hunters, now but two hundred yards across, two canoes cruised cautiously, each paddled by a brawny young buck while in the prow of each an old native stood poised with a sealing spear held aloft.

The body of the young sea otter suddenly disappeared and watchful hunters knew that the mother had snatched it from below, drawing it to fancied safety. Kobi, sounding again, his lungs refreshed, swam confusedly in aimless circles. When next



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he rose it was to find the head of an old male otter breaking surface near him. A rifle ball found its mark, and Kobi, diving again instantly, saw a dark shape sinking slowly through the clear water. The old dog otter, shot while his lungs were deflated of air failed to float, but sank and wore his thousand-dollar pelt to the bottom of the Pacific. Already another otter, similarly shot through the head, had disappeared before the natives could retrieve it. A third floated and was pulled into a canoe that darted swiftly to the spot. The white men, substituting guns for native spears, had thus made the surround more deadly, but also doubly wasteful. A full half of the otters so shot sank and their pelts were lost.

The mother sea otter, alarmed at the limpness of the dead babe that she still clasped to her breast, rose to give it air, dived again instantly, but too late. One of the aged natives made his cast, and his spear, following her under water, pierced her body. She sank, but a long rawhide cord, one end attached to the spear while the other was fast to a float fashioned from an inflated seal skin, sustained her weight. No pelts were lost when seals or sea otters were hunted by spear and float in old-time native fashion.

Kobi, hopelessly bewildered, continued to dive and to rise again. His mother, having held to the straight course, missed Kobi. She rose to the surface and during the excitement attendant upon the other killings, half of the canoes being engaged in a vain search for the two sinking otters, she managed to fill her lungs with air. Then, instead of diving far under the canoe and out of the deadly circle to safety, she quested back in the face of almost certain death to search for Kobi.

The floundering Kobi felt himself seized from below and snatched beneath the surface. The next instant, clasped firmly by his mother's short forelegs, he was being propelled through the water at top speed. The hunters saw a dark shape, so close to the surface that it threw a ripple, heading directly toward the

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nearest canoe. Promptly the paddlers put back so that she would be forced to rise within the deadly circle. The canoes on the far side, observing this maneuver and interpreting it accurately, moved forward at once. But Kobi's mother, a wise old sea otter who had escaped from fearsome meshes of three native surrounds before now, dipped deeper and doubled on her course.

Kobi, his lungs refreshed by his repeated flounderings on the surface and now finding it unnecessary to burn up this fuel by rapid muscular exertion of his own, remained immersed for a longer period than any since his initial plunge. A dark shape moved above them, traveling in the opposite direction. His mother, her own lungs aching, passed far beyond the canoes and held on until Kobi's struggles annouced that he neared the point of suffocation. Then she rose and they both took on air, remaining undiscovered for a moment. Then a rifle ball, spatting viciously upon the water close to them, drove them under and the old otter strug-

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gled on desperately toward safety. She tacked and doubled to elude three pursuing canoes. Not once were the boats sufficiently stationary to afford opportunity for accurate shooting when she rose to the surface for air. Shooting from a skimming canoe was a difficult feat and when the paddler slacked off to permit a better aiming the otter dived again.

For two miles this desperate chase kept on. Then the old otter, almost at the limit of endurance, rounded a point and came out into a stretch that was exposed to the sweep of the open sea. The waves afforded a measure of protection and eventually she shook off her pursuers and struck out in a northerly direction across the open waters of the Gulf of Alaska.

At last she turned upon her back and rested. Kobi, thoroughly exhausted, slept for many hours upon her breast. When he waked it was to find the sea all about him filled with traveling fur seals, the big spring migration of the fur-seal herds coming back from the south to push on to the breeding grounds on the distant Pribyloffs in the Bering Sea. These travelers surged on in thousands. Kobi observed several smudges on the horizon, a few sails looming above the edge of the sea, columns of smoke not far distant—the sealing fleet, steam and sailing vessels of British, Russian, Japanese, and American registry following the northward migration routes of the fur-seal herds to prey upon them.

The herd had been located from the lookouts of various sealers, and already the hunting boats had put out from parent vessels in considerable force. A dull rumble of reports sounded from far and wide across the surface of the sea as the slaughter progressed. This killing, too, was wasteful, for nearly half of the seals that were shot by the hunters sank before they could be retrieved. Twice during the day Kobi and his mother were chased by sealing boats and again the young sea otter knew the fear of the vicious spurts of water thrown up close to his ears as rifle bullets searched for him. But in both instances the two

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otters eluded their pursuers without great difficulty. There was a fair sea running, which hampered the marksmanship of the gunners and also permitted Kobi and his mother to rise frequently for breath while protected from sight in the trough between two waves.

These two ordeals—to be caught in the mesh of a native surround and to run the gantlet of pelagic sealers in the open sea—were never to be experienced again by Kobi. The fur-seal herds of the Pacific, once ranging in magnificent millions, had been scaled down to a pitiful remnant. That year was destined almost to put an end to Pacific fur seals. But in the following year, by a treaty between the nations, pelagic sealing was abolished.



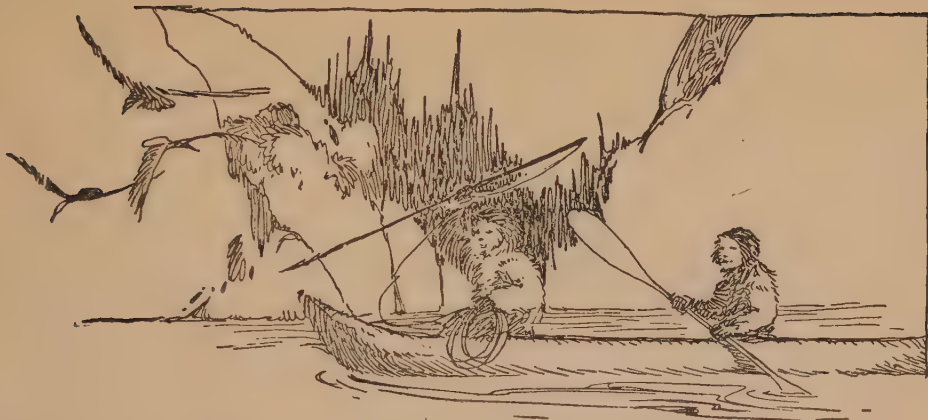
The Growth of Kobi

Kobi's mother cruised northward until she came to the shores of Montague Island, a large body of land, wild, rugged and with heavily forested shores and snow-clad peaks, uninhabited even by natives. She loitered here on the Pacific side of the rockbound shores of Montague, a favorite resort of sea otters. And presently two old friends, a mother sea otter and her female babe that also had escaped from the surround, joined Kobi and his mother off the shores of Montague. Thus reunited, Kobi resumed his play with Katalli, the young she-otter. They romped together in the surf, rolling over and over in the tumbling seas, and together they coasted on the crests of incoming breakers. Also they dived together to hunt for sea eggs, for they were now learning to shift for themselves.

Kobi, after his appetite had been appeased, often emulated the example of his mother and gathered still more sea eggs, going to sleep upon his back with these reserve delicacies clasped to his breast with his broad forepaws, waking occasionally to eat one.

There are seasons when the pelts of all the different fur bearers show the effects of rubbing, when the fur is unprime, the time of year varying according to the species. The fur of fox and marten, even in far northern climes, begins to slip in February or in March. The pelts of beaver and muskrat are prime in April. The bear, coming from his den in May, is covered with a coat of long hair, wearing a prime pelt long after hair of all other land fur bearers has started to slip. The sea otter, to his own undoing, wears a pelt that is perfect and prime every month in the year. Yet it had been a matter of comment among sealers and fur buyers that the hides of many sea otters showed queer rubbed

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spots—not on flanks, sides or backs, such as characterize late-caught spring pelts of other fur bearers, but small bare spots high on the breasts of otherwise perfect pelts. Now the only thought of most sealers was merely to fire instantly at the head of any sea otter that broke water, not to observe for so much as a second except through the sights of a rifle. As a consequence little was known of the habits of this vanishing breed. Not one live specimen graced the zoological parks of the world. The matter of these small bare patches on the breasts of sea-otter pelts occasioned some speculation. Kobi could have explained the matter. The shell of the sea egg is knobby and rough. The sea otter, sleeping on its back and clasping to its breast a cluster of these rough objects, is rocked by the action of the waves, a motion sufficient in the course of time to rasp the hair from the spot where the sea eggs are held. Kobi himself, from adoption of this custom, soon was showing a rubbed spot on his breast just between his forelegs.

A dozen or more of Kobi's clan inhabited the Pacific side of Montague. Soon a small boat outfitted both with white and with native hunters, cruised into those isolated waters on a sea-otter hunt. The two mothers and their infants, accompanied by an old male that attached himself to the party, moved on north and west, rounded the Kenai Peninsula and stopped for a period off

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the mouth of Cook's Inlet. It was here that Kobi had his first glimpse of belugas, the white whales of the north. These small milk-white whales inhabited the inlet in numbers.

Then the pod of sea otters, its ranks now augmented by a barren three-year-old female, moved westward along the Alaskan Peninsula after having been driven from these parts by other hunters. Later still they crossed to the Kodiak-Afognak Islands. Kobi, his endurance now almost equal to that of the adult otters, preferred traveling with Katalli. She would romp and play with him, the spirits of these youngsters rebounding more rapidly after being hunted than did those of the older members of the pod. Kobi and Katalli, having escaped each new danger, looked forward with the optimism of youth to better days. The older animals had been hunted throughout their lives. They had seen the thousands of their fellows that swarmed round the rocky islands and in offshore reefs depleted almost to the vanishing point. Each of them had experienced many a narrow escape. Past experience had not been of a variety that led to any belief other than that they

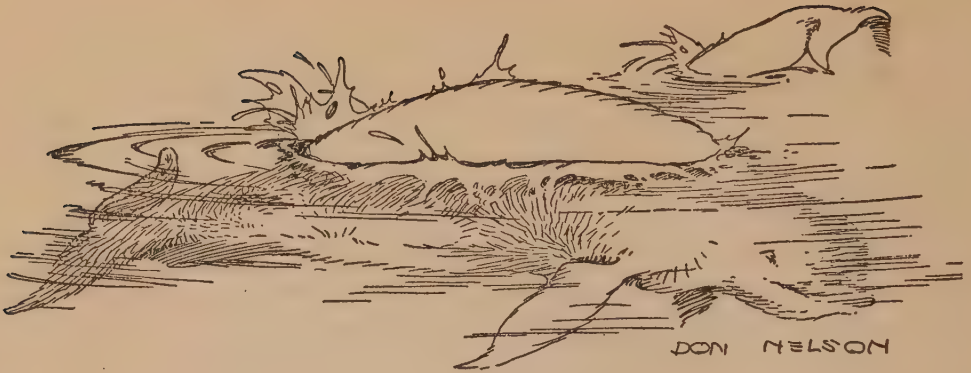
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would be hunted persistently to the end. They were friendly, even affectionate, but not inclined to play. The strain of constant apprehension and watchfulness was not conducive to playfulness. Kobi, therefore, could turn only to Katalli when his youthful spirits demanded a vigorous bit of play to relieve the strain of constant caution.

It was in the Shelikof Straits that he encountered his first bad storm. High-rolling waves he knew, for these were bad waters, but he had experienced no such violence of the elements before. A gale rolled out of the west to lash the waters of the straits. The wind screeched with increasing fury and tossed up mountainous seas. Kobi found himself first in a deep trough with tremendous walls of water on all sides, then riding the crest of



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a watery peak, lashed by stinging froth, with green canyons yawning all about him. For two days and nights the storm raged with unabated fury. Kobi grew hungry. The sea otter could not repair to shallow banks and dive for sea eggs in such a blow. With these tremendous seas running, the rocks of shallow banks would be bare one moment and submerged beneath a dozen fathoms the next, and an attempt to feed there would probably result in his being pounded to death on the rocks of the shores.

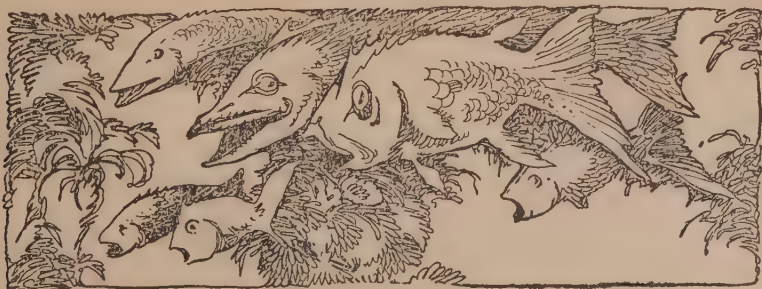
At last the blow wore itself out and the giant seas became less violent. Autumn was coming on and Kobi was to encounter these storms of the North Pacific with increasing frequency. Left unmolested, the otters would have preferred to linger in some favorite group of islands or along some particular stretch of coast line, but there was ever some hunter to hound them on, so they traveled farther to the westward along the Alaska Peninsula and among the outlying islands.

They were now in the country of the Aleuts, natives who were expert boatmen and sea-otter hunters. They put to sea in skin bidarkas, narrow crafts completely covered over save for the hatches where the paddlers knelt, and to which were attached waterproof seal skins so fitted that the loose ends were tied round the paddlers' waists to seal out the water.

THE GROWTH OF KOBİ

Winter shut down upon the northern seas. The remnants of the fur-seal herds migrated southward to more sunny climes. It is probable that Kobi's clan, too, in an earlier day before so many hunters swarmed in southern waters, moved south ahead of winter storms—not in a systematic migration like that of the seals, but rather as a scattered withdrawal ahead of inclement weather. No record of it remains, but it seems probable from the fact that the sea otter is poorly equipped by habit to withstand extremely cold temperatures.

With the first raging blizzard of the winter Kobi, to whose well-furred body the waters still seemed warm, felt the effect of the bitter temperature of the outside air to which his face was exposed. He suffered greatly. Reclining on his back, the whipping spray soon began to freeze on his muzzle, frosting his tender nose and eyelids. He was forced to dip his head frequently beneath the surface to prevent the freezing of these members. As the winter progressed storms raged across the North Pacific with increasing violence. Spray froze on hulls, decks and rigging of boats, and as they passed they appeared as white ghosts of ships plowing through the smother. It was a particularly severe winter and the little pod of sea otters with which Kobi consorted was hard pressed. Late in the winter the old dog otter that had joined the others off Montague, his nose frozen until it swelled and hindered his breathing, gave up the struggle, and Kobi saw him no more.



The Last of the Sea Otter

With the coming of spring there were gunboats patrolling the North Pacific and the Bering Sea to enforce the new sealing law, protecting the seals on their breeding ground in the Pribyloffs and patrolling the migration routes to apprehend such vessels as might engage in seal piracy. This occupation, it was soon discovered, was both hazardous and unprofitable. The remaining seals were few, the crews of the gunboats watchful, the possibility of profit more than offset by the risk.

Sea-otter hunting was also prohibited, but these animals received no such adequate protection. It was one thing to equip steam or sailing vessel with an expensive crew for seal piracy in the open seas, where detection was almost certain and where the catch must consist of thousands of pelts to defray the bare expenses even in the event that the craft avoided capture, but it was a far simpler and safer matter for a hunter to cruise in a small boat along some isolated stretch of uninhabited coast line to poach for an animal so valuable that a single pelt would show a profit on the season's operations. Seal piracy soon died out, while sea-otter poaching increased.

The fur seals began to increase, slowly at first, then with increasing rapidity until they were destined at last to become sufficiently numerous so that their skins once more would constitute an important item of commerce. Kobi's clan, however, continued its swift descent into oblivion.

McDonald, a shrewd and well-known trader of Western Alaska, tried to remedy this situation. It was only one more instance of the traditional shortsightedness of the fur trade to permit it, he pointed out—the same sort of folly that had permitted over-

THE LAST OF THE SEA OTTER



hunting to reduce the fur seals from more than three million animals to a remnant of thirty thousand, then to protest against the protection of the remaining few; the same suicidal policy that had resulted in the overtrapping that had removed the beaver skin as an important item of commerce more than a half a century before. It was not the poachers but the fur traders who were to blame, he insisted. The hunters would not take the pelts if the traders refused to purchase them. That was certain. Ten or a dozen years of protection of the few remaining thousands of sea otters would result in a tremendous increase so that the season

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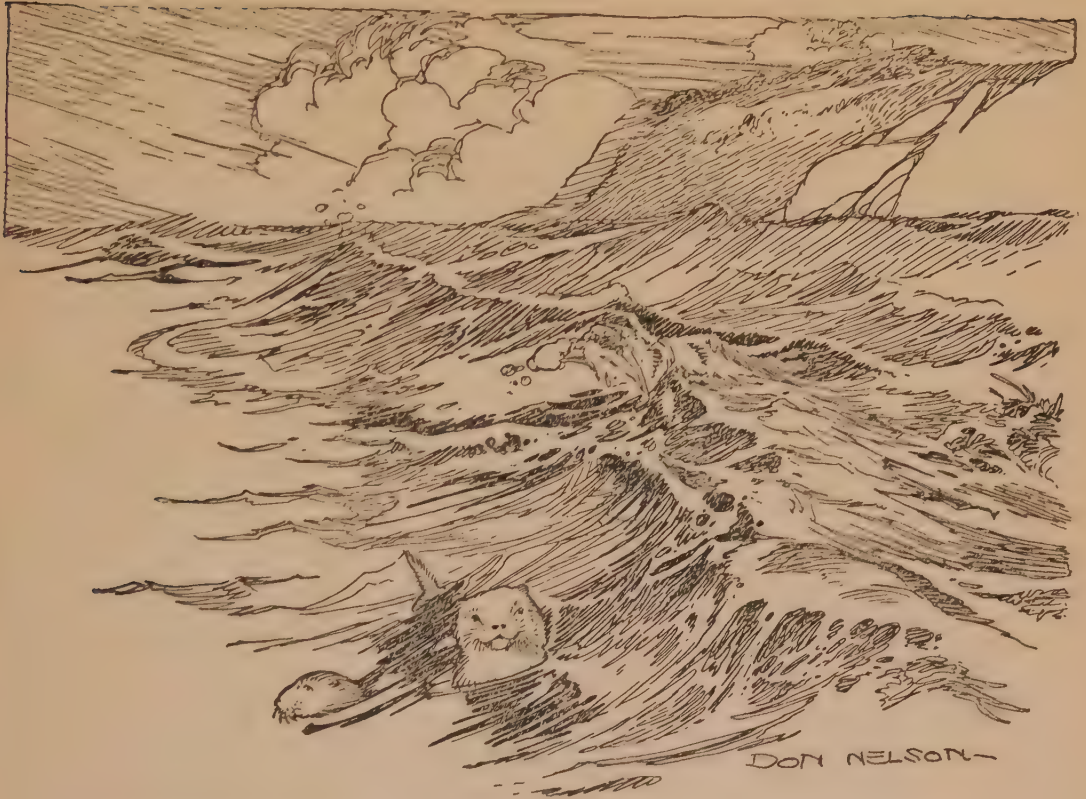
could be opened and every hunter of Western Alaska could expect to bag a sufficient number of pelts annually to furnish him a magnificent income. This fugitive practice of hunting down the few survivors would result in the extermination of the breed in five years.

Besides, there was the matter of price. As the sea otter grew rarer the price per pelt instead of increasing had diminished considerably so far as the local hunters and traders were concerned. Outside fur buyers, taking long chances in smuggling out pelts, demanded a larger profit on their end, as did the furriers who handled the contraband pelts after they had arrived in the States. Therefore the price that the smuggling fur buyers would pay to local traders did not exceed a third of former returns. Far better that all concerned should wait ten years and see the day when every sea-otter hunter could bag half a dozen annually, market them lawfully for a thousand dollars or so a skin, than to persist in the present practice of poaching one or two skins annually and receiving three hundred dollars apiece for them from outside trade. To see the wisdom of it, McDonald insisted, any man needed only to apply common sense.

But he found few that were endowed with sufficient of that commodity to enable them to see beyond the possibility of immediate small profit whenever a contraband sea-otter skin appeared at a trading post. The animal was dead, they argued, so what good would result from refusing to purchase the pelt? Refusal would not restore it to life. McDonald's missionary work in this respect, even though backed by the better class of traders, failed to bear fruit. Even among those who pretended to accord most heartily with his views there were some who played it up to their own advantage.

Chief among the traffickers in contraband sea-otter skins, McDonald was satisfied, was one Karendoff, a Russian trader of the native village of Kalitak. Karendoff was engaged in various businesses besides that of fur trader, one of which was a

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private herring saltery. It was no feat to conceal a half dozen sea-otter pelts in a barrel of herring, fill the receptacle with brine and ship it with a consignment of barreled herring to a confederate in the States. Karendoff resorted to this method and many others in smuggling out sea-otter pelts, but McDonald could not prove it. Sea-otter poaching and the smuggling of pelts became a recognized occupation.

Meanwhile Kobi saw fewer and fewer of his own kind, though the other mammals of the northern seas he encountered in numbers as abundant as formerly. Whales and sea lions were holding their own and the fur seal were increasing year by year. The few survivors of his own kind were in constant danger. There were no more organized native surrounds and no longer did

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swarms of hunting boats put off from pelagic sealing vessels in the open sea, but these advantages were more than offset by the resourceful white and native poachers who prowled the inshore waters among the islands and the rocky reefs in small swift power boats and skin bidarkas. There seemed no haven of refuge.

During his second year Kobi slept on his back one bright warm day and drifted too close to a group of barren rocks that rose from the sea. A patient Aleut, knowing this spot to be a favorite resort of sea otters, had waited in concealment there for several days. Now he was looking down the barrel of his rifle at Kobi, the nearest member of the pod. It was a long shot. The hunter had hoped that the otters would come to the rocks. But they were drifting in a direction that would bring them down wind from him. It was but a question of minutes until one of the pod would catch his scent and give the alarm. Then every animal would dive and disappear on the instant and his long awaited chance would be lost.

Kobi, sleeping on his back, presented the best target. The native pulled on his breast and pressed the trigger. Kobi woke with a shock, one forepaw shattered and a long burning streak of fire across his breast. An inch or two lower and the rifle ball would have finished him. When again he broke surface he was out of range of the native hunter on the rock. For several weeks the long diagonal wound on his breast pained him somewhat, but far less than the shattered foot. The injury to that member also proved a serious handicap in securing and handling sea eggs. After it had healed he had only partial use of it and when again the hair grew upon the wound on his breast it came in white, leaving a long diagonal white streak in his dark fur.

He mated that year with Katalli, the she-otter who had been the playmate of his infancy. And in the spring Katalli was carrying a tiny infant clasped to her breast with her short forelegs. Kobi drifted always near her as Katalli crooned soft

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lullabies to her babe. Kobi's mother, too, had a new infant daughter at her breast.

There was no season of respite for Kobi's clan. In midsummer when the pelts of land fur bearers were unprime and valueless, they were left unmolested by men, and so went about the business of rearing their young. But Kobi's pelt was prime throughout the year and it was in midsummer when the weather was fairest and the sea its calmest that men hunted for him most persistently.

It was on a hot still day in August that Kobi's mother, drifting too close to a watchful Aleut concealed in a crevice of the rocks at low tide, was shot through the head, and her infant, floundering round the spot, was left behind as the rest of the pod dived and headed for the open sea.

Sea-otter poaching was followed so relentlessly that by the time Kobi had reached his sixth year men waked to the fact that the sea otter was definitely of the past. Once ranging the Pacific coast of America in untold thousands, various authorities estimated the possible number of sea otters left alive in the oceans of

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the world at from thirty to forty individuals, most of them in the waters of Western Alaska.

Karendoff, discussing the matter with McDonald, deplored the passing of the sea otter. To which McDonald replied gruffly. He knew this Karendoff.

"If only the fools had listened to reason six years back when there were still sea otters left in these waters, there'd have been close to twenty thousand now, and a few years hence every hunter and trader in Western Alaska would have been making big money again, instead of regretting that there's only thirty or forty sea otters left on the whole Pacific coast," Mac stated surlily. "And what did all this poaching of the last few years get them? Not one thing! Not a hunter or trader in Western Alaska made more than a few dollars out of it. They tossed off their chance for nothing, and worked hard at it."

Karendoff, standing with McDonald on the high rocky headland where the latter had built his post, gazed reflectively out across the sea to a group of low flat islands and rocky reefs some five miles offshore. "Anyway, you have saved a few," he said. "Natives tell me that one last little pod of sea otters is ranging among Cormorant Reefs and that you have protected them well from poachers. How many, do you know?"

"None," McDonald said. "Poachers cleaned out the reefs last year. There were only four. They got them all."

Karendoff's little eyes studied McDonald's face. Its expression spoke of concealment rather than of anger or regret over the occurrence that he had just reported. It was not convincing.

"Ah! That is bad," said Karendoff; "very bad."

After his departure McDonald, sitting on the lofty headland, trained his powerful binoculars on the reefs and the islands, so flat that they were almost awash at high tide. The day was calm, the waters almost glassily smooth with but a gentle swell. Eventually McDonald made out a tiny speck that was Kobi floating asleep on the surface between two outlying rocks.

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For Kobi and Katalli were still numbered among the few survivors of their clan. Some two years back they had drifted to Cormorant Reefs, once a favorite resort for their kind, and they had found two other sea otters there. Still another, an unattached female, had come drifting in. They had remained there for the reason that for the first time in their lives they were unmolested. The local natives knew quite well that swift justice would be dealt to them by McDonald if he detected them in the act of sea-otter hunting. His glasses could sweep the entire expanse of low flat islands and rocks of Cormorant Reefs and there was small chance of a boat that pursued otters thereabouts escaping his vigilance.

McDonald, supplied with food and water for several days, made an annual pilgrimage to the reefs, cached his boat and remained in concealment to watch these few survivors of a vanishing race to determine whether or not they increased. There was one

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among them that was recognizable as an individual, an old dog otter with a diagonal white streak across the dark fur of his breast. This fellow, always accompanied by his mate, had a favorite hauling-out place on the rocks at the head of a shallow inlet. When McDonald made his visit on Kobi's sixth summer the otters of Cormorant Reefs had increased to eight. There was one yearling of the past season and there were two females with newborn infants. Again he watched Kobi, the white-scarred dog otter, haul out on the rocks at the head of the inlet. Close at hand Katalli floated on her back, and McDonald could hear the low crooning notes that she hummed to the tiny mite of fur at her breast.

Kobi lolled about in the warm days of summer, rode out the winter storms, but always he remained in a limited area that

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embraced the low flat islands and rocks of Cormorant Reefs. Sea eggs, his favorite food, were abundant. Fish, too, when he chose to vary his diet, swarmed in the shallow waters. He had reverted to the life led by his forbears generations in the past, no longer continually harassed and hounded from one spot to the next. Having found a haven of refuge here, and food in plenty, he remained. He had almost forgotten the old life of constant danger and watchfulness, the ceaseless traveling. Now he could indulge his natural taste for play and romp with Katalli and her young. During the next six years the little pod of otters in Cormorant Reefs increased to twenty-three. Once in that time poachers raided the place but succeeded in killing only one otter before McDonald was after them in a power boat. Other animals, hounded from various retreats, had drifted into this haven and remained. A few pairs had drifted away. Kobi and Katalli were now twelve years of age, quite old as sea otters go.

In other spots, too, their tribe had been gradually increasing. Certain factors had contributed to this increase after the species had been considered as virtually doomed to extinction. With the risks attendant upon the smuggling of sea-otter pelts the outside buyers had refused to pay more than two hundred dollars a skin at the maximum. Now, too, the sale of a pelt in the United States was absolutely taboo, so the customers who were willing to risk confiscation of their furs were few. Also, sea otters had become so rare that a hunter might cruise for an entire season without so much as sighting one. Most of the poachers had quit the game. So, gradually, the few remaining pods and scattered pairs had increased. McDonald now estimated the number of sea otters in the waters of Western Alaska as well in excess of two hundred individuals, and his hope of seeing the coasts and islands once more abundantly populated with them revived somewhat.

But this very increase was, in a way, a menace. Rumors of the increase led former poachers to believe that there might now be opportunity to make a profit from engaging again in the

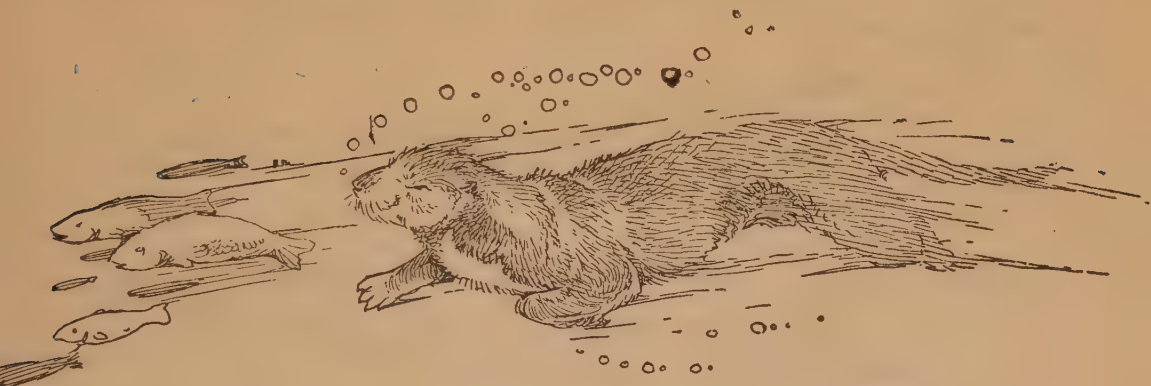
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traffic. Still, the restriction against marketing skins in America and the consequently small price that would accrue to local hunters and traders were deterring factors. Then Karendoff set about devising some means to eliminate these troublesome obstacles. He studied long, and eventually came forth with a plausible argument.

It was well known that during severe winter storms some sea otters became afflicted with frozen noses and perished from the effects, also that the carcasses of some of these unfortunates occasionally were washed ashore. In the old days when the animals had been abundant it had been the practice of the natives to follow the shore line in bidarkas after particularly severe storms to search for such prizes as might have been washed up by the waves. Now the possession of a sea-otter skin was a punishable offense. Natives, being forced to live largely upon the natural resources of the region, had been accorded certain privileges in matters of hunting and fishing that were denied to the whites. Why, then, deprive them of this perfectly harmless source of revenue to be derived from salvaging the skin of animals that were already dead? No harm in that. The arguments were plausibly put.

McDonald tried to block this regulation. In order to prevent the alleged waste of the few possible sea-otter skins that might be salvaged from dead animals, it would actually operate to legalize the slaughter of sea otters, he insisted. What was there to prevent every native from making affidavit that the sea-otter skins in his possession were retrieved from animals found dead when actually he had slain them? What to hinder a white poacher or trader from bribing a native to make affidavit to cover any skin, no matter how obtained? But his arguments were unavailing, and so the matter stood. Traders could now send sea-otter skins openly to market and secure good prices for them if each pelt was accompanied by an affidavit from some native to the effect that the animal had been found dead.

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That year some forty-odd skins were salvaged from dead sea otters, according to the affidavits, even though the winter had been particularly mild and open. Karendoff handled at least half of the skins, marketed them at prices ranging up to fifteen hundred dollars apiece and profited enormously.

"So much better this way," he sighed. "The poor natives of my district can now realize on such dead animals as they find. It has eliminated all the waste."

McDonald grunted.

"And how is the pod of sea otters offshore from your post—in Cormorant Reefs?" Karendoff inquired. "Flourishing, I hear."

"You hear wrong!" McDonald growled.

And Karendoff smiled.

Shortly thereafter a native of Kalitak desired to take to wife a young Aleut girl of the village and he haunted the barabara of her parents. But the Aleut girl favored the suit of one from a neighboring settlement. The love-lorn Aleut consulted Karendoff, who listened, calculating meanwhile as to possible profit.

"Most difficult," he said reflectively. "I will see what can be done. It might be arranged. With your skill, it will be not too difficult for you to find two sea otters that have died and washed ashore. When you come to me with two perfect skins I will use my influence with the girl to see that she favors the suit of so worthy a hunter as yourself."

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The Aleut nodded.

"I have heard the Cormorant Reefs harbor many sea otters that have grown tame from lack of hunting," Karendoff said reflectively.

The native nodded his understanding. He, too, knew of the sea otters of the Cormorant Reefs—and why it was a dangerous matter to hunt them. If he showed himself among the Cormorant Reefs in the light of day and shot a sea otter the trader McDonald would be most certain to apprehend him. And it was impossible to shoot at night.

But in the early days of sea-otter hunting the Aleuts had employed other methods as effective as the surround. For three nights the native worked secretly in his barabara and on the fourth he put to sea in his single-hatch bidarka. For two days he paddled along the shore toward McDonald's stronghold. Then, by night, he put off for Cormorant Reefs, cached his bidarka and concealed himself on a flat island from which he could spy upon the action of the otters.

He saw Kobi and Katalli swim the length of a shallow inlet and haul out upon the rocks at their favorite landing spot, accompanied by a three-month infant. Both were large old otters. The sea otter, in fact, is the largest of the world's fur bearers—excepting bears. Kobi's pelt would stretch a good seven feet in length from tip to tip.

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After perhaps an hour or two of romping among the rocks the sea-otter family took to the water again and swam in leisurely fashion out of the inlet, dived for sea eggs and then posted off to visit with their neighbors. The distant observer waited until night fell again, then set out in his bidarka for the narrow inlet. Some distance back from its mouth he stretched the sea-otter net that he had constructed in the privacy of his barabara.

The floats attached to its upper edge held it suspended, the weights along its opposite extremity drew its lower edge deep in the water. The two ends he attached to opposite shores by means of light rawhide ropes, securing them but slightly so that a tug of any proportions would release them. The loose net would belly with the current, in with flow tide, out with ebb. When everything had been arranged to his satisfaction the native retired to a point of vantage and settled patiently to wait. He was supplied with food and water to last ten days if necessary.

For two days and nights he waited without results. Then, just at dusk, Kobi, Katalli and their infant son swam into the narrow inlet. The native watched anxiously. The net had been so constructed that it sagged slightly between the floats. Kobi



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pressed down and passed over one of these sagging spots, followed by Katalli and the young sea otter. The family hauled out on the rocks at the head of the inlet and played about.

Still the Aleut waited with exceeding patience. The tide was going out, which would belly the net in the right direction. He waited until the ebb tide was running strong, and looked toward the shore to make sure that it was sufficiently dark so that his movements could not be observed by that grim watcher on the distant headland. Then he put off in his bidarka.

Kobi, lazily content, romped in the shallow water with his infant son, who rode him about in much the same gleeful fashion in which the human infant bestrides the back of his parent. When Kobi hauled out, the youngster likewise emerged to gallop proudly about the rocks to show off his gait to his admiring elders. Katalli dived for a fish and came up with it flashing in her jaws. Then she crawled out on the rocks and joined Kobi. She nosed his face affectionately, a trait exhibited in somewhat lesser degree by female sea lions toward their lords and masters. These two, once the prey of constant terror, had for years lived without fear. Then, suddenly, as if a horror out of the past, the dreaded man scent drifted strong and rank to Kobi's nostrils.

With the terror of past experience crowding upon him, he took to the water just as a wild hunting cry such as he had known in the old days of the surround smote his ears. He dived instantly, with Katalli, her baby clasped to her, speeding beside him some six feet under water. They struck the center of the net at top speed. Kobi, believing the yielding strands to be seaweed, forged ahead, squeezing through a coarse mesh and into a pocket.

Katalli had performed a similar feat some ten feet farther along the net. The speed with which they had struck the net had loosed the mooring cords and the two ends floated together. Their struggles still further enmeshed them.

The native, having left the rocks, now rounded the point in his bidarka and headed into the inlet. The floats of the net were

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now tangled. There was no further movement and he was well content.

A week later McDonald cruised down the coast to Kalitak. Soon after landing there Karendoff escorted him to his fur loft and showed him two beautiful sea-otter pelts.

They represented the two color phases of the sea-otter tribe. The fur of each was rich and dark throughout. The difference in the color rested only upon the scattered guard hairs that peeped out. In one the guard hairs were white, lending to the skin a slight silvery overtone, so slight as to be scarcely noticeable except in certain lights, rivaling the beauty of the pelt of a silver fox and many times the size. In the other pelt, slightly the smaller of the two, the sprinkled guard hairs were of golden hue.

McDonald stroked the big pelt with guard hairs of white. It

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was one of the largest that he had ever seen, stretching over seven feet from tip to tip; a rare beauty even in the old days of abundant pelts, almost a miracle now. Then he saw the diagonal streak of white fur across the breast, an old wound. He had known the old dog otter with the white scar for many years now. The other, the gold-tipped pelt, would be that of his mate. They would have been swimming together. He knew their favorite hauling-out place on the flat rocks at the head of that narrow inlet—an ideal place for a sea-otter net. He cursed under his breath.

“Two most wonderful pelts,” Karendoff purred, stroking them. “A gold-tip and a silver-tip, each of exceeding beauty. They will fetch fifteen hundred apiece, now that they can be marketed legally. The otters were found dead sometime after last winter’s storms.”

“Yes. A long time after the winter storms,” McDonald growled. I saw that white-scarred otter among Cormorant Reefs less than two months ago.”

“Impossible,” Karendoff suavely murmured. “You must have mistaken it. You saw another white-scarred one perhaps, but not the equal of this. There could not be two such pelts. And this pair of skins has been in my loft since February. I have the affidavits of the native who found them dead.”

“Yes! Dead in a sea-otter net on Cormorant Reefs,” McDonald said.

His newborn hope that sea otters would once more populate the waters of Western Alaska in goodly numbers died within him. He knew that Karendoff lied. But what could he do so long as any native could make such affidavits?

Karendoff smiled after him. And shortly thereafter the Russian shipped eight sea-otter skins, among which were the lovely pelts of Kobi and Katalli, and attached to each one was an affidavit to the effect that some native had found its original wearer dead along the shore after a severe winter storm.

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